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1878

To my Wife.

19 Sept. 1887.

LA SAISIAZ :

THE TWO POETS OF CROISIC.

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THE TWO POETS OF
CROISIC :

BY
ROBERT BROWNING.

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DEDICATED
TO
MRS SUTHERLAND ORR

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LA SAISIAZ



I.

GOOD, to forgive ;

Best, to forget !

Living, we fret ;

Dying, we live.

Fretless and free,

Soul, clap thy pinion !

Earth have dominion,

Body, o'er thee !

2.

Wander at will,

Day after day,—

Wander away,

Wandering still—

Soul that canst soar !

Body may slumber :

Body shall cumber

Soul-flight no more.

3.

Waft of soul's wing !

What lies above ?

Sunshine and Love,

Skyblue and Spring !

Body hides—where ?

Ferns of all feather;

Mosses and heather,

Yours be the care !

LA SAISIAZ.

A. E. S. SEPTEMBER 14, 1877.

DARED and done : at last I stand upon the summit,

Dear and True !

Singly dared and done ; the climbing both of us were
bound to do.

Petty feat and yet prodigious : every side my glance was
bent

O'er the grandeur and the beauty lavished through the
whole ascent.

Ledge by ledge, out broke new marvels, now minute and
now immense :

Earth's most exquisite disclosure, heaven's own God in
evidence !

And no berry in its hiding, no blue space in its out-
spread,

Pleaded to escape my footstep, challenged my emerging
head,

(As I climbed or paused from climbing, now o'erbranched
by shrub and tree,

Now built round by rock and boulder, now at just a turn
set free,

Stationed face to face with—Nature? rather with
Infinitude)

---No revealment of them all, as singly I my path
pursued,

But a bitter touched its sweetness, for the thought stung

“ Even so

Both of us had loved and wondered just the same,
five days ago ! ”

Five short days, sufficient hardly to entice, from out its
den

Splintered in the slab, this pink perfection of the
cyclamen ;

Scarce enough to heal and coat with amber gum the
sloe-tree's gash,

Bronze the clustered wilding apple, redden ripe the
mountain-ash :

Yet of might to place between us—Oh the barrier ! Yon
Profound

Shrinks beside it, proves a pin-point : barrier this, with-
out a bound !

Boundless though it be, I reach you : somehow seem to
have you here

—Who are there. Yes, there you dwell now, plain the
four low walls appear ;

Those are vineyards, they enclose from ; and the little
spire which points

—That's Collonge, henceforth your dwelling ! All the
same, howe'er disjoints

Past from present, no less certain you are here, not
there : have dared,

Done the feat of mountain-climbing,—five days since, we
both prepared

Daring, doing, arm in arm, if other help should haply
fail.

For you asked, as forth we sallied to see sunset from the
vale,

“ Why not try for once the mountain,—take a foretaste,
snatch by stealth

Sight and sound, some unconsidered fragment of the
hoarded wealth ?

Six weeks at its base, yet never once have we together
won

Sight or sound by honest climbing : let us two have
dared and done

Just so much of twilight journey as may prove to-
morrow's jaunt

Not the only mode of wayfare—wheeled to reach the
eagle's haunt ! ”

So, we turned from the low grass-path you were pleased
to call “ your own,”

Set our faces to the rose-bloom o'er the summit's front of
stone

Where Salève obtains, from Jura and the sunken sun she
hides,

Due return of blushing "Good Night," rosy as a borne-off
bride's,

For his masculine "Good Morrow" when, with sunrise
still in hold,

Gay he hails her, and, magnific, thrilled her black length
burns to gold.

Up and up we went, how careless—nay, how joyous!
All was new,

All was strange. "Call progress toilsome? that were just
insulting you!

How the trees must temper noontide! Ah, the thicket's
sudden break!

What will be the morning glory, when at dusk thus
gleams the lake?

Light by light puts forth Geneva : what a land—and, of
the land,

Can there be a lovelier station than this spot where now
we stand?

Is it late, and wrong to linger? True, to-morrow makes
amends.

Toilsome progress? child's play, call it—specially when
one descends!

There, the dread descent is over—hardly our adventure,
though!

Take the vale where late we left it, pace the grass-path,
'mine,' you know!

Proud completion of achievement!" And we paced it,
praising still

That soft tread on velvet verdure as it wound through
hill and hill;

And at very end there met us, coming from Collonge,
the pair

—All our people of the Chalet—two, enough and none
to spare.

So, we made for home together, and we reached it as the
stars

One by one came lamping—chiefly that prepotency of
Mars—

And your last word was “I owe you this enjoyment!”—
met with “Nay:

With yourself it rests to have a month of morrows like
to-day!”

Then the meal, with talk and laughter, and the news of
that rare nook

Yet untroubled by the tourist, touched on by no travel-
book,

All the same—though latent—patent, hybrid birth of
land and sea,

And (our travelled friend assured you)—if such miracle
might be—

Comparable for completeness of both blessings—all
around

Nature, and, inside her circle, safety from world's sight
and sound—

Comparable to our Saisiaz. “Hold it fast and guard it
well !

Go and see and vouch for certain, then come back and
never tell

Living soul but us ; and haply, prove our sky from cloud
as clear,

There may we four meet, praise fortune just as now,
another year !”

Thus you charged him on departure : not without the
final charge

“ Mind to-morrow’s early meeting ! We must leave our
journey marge

Ample for the wayside wonders : there’s the stoppage at
the inn

Three-parts up the mountain, where the hardships of the
track begin ;

There’s the convent worth a visit ; but, the triumph
crowning all—

There’s Salève’s own platform facing glory which strikes
greatness small,

—Blanc, supreme above his earth-brood, needles red
and white and green,

Horns of silver, fangs of crystal set on edge in his
demesne.

So, some three weeks since, we saw them : so, to-morrow
we intend

You shall see them likewise ; therefore Good Night till
to-morrow, friend ! ”

Last, the nothings that extinguish embers of a vivid day :
“ What might be the Marshal’s next move, what Gambetta’s counter-play ”

Till the landing on the staircase saw escape the latest
spark :

“ Sleep you well ! ” “ Sleep but as well, you ! ”—lazy
love quenched, all was dark.

Nothing dark next day at sundawn ! Up I rose and
forth I fared :

Took my plunge within the bath-pool, pacified the
watch-dog scared,

Saw proceed the transmutation --Jura's black to one
gold glow,

Trod your level path that let me drink the morning deep
and slow,

Reached the little quarry—ravage recompensed by shrub
and fern—

Till the overflowing ardours told me time was for
return.

So, return I did, and gaily. But, for once, from no far
mound

Waved salute a tall white figure. “Has her sleep been
so profound?

Foresight, rather, prudent saving strength for day's ex-
penditure !

Ay, the chamber-window's open : out and on the terrace,
sure ! ”

No, the terrace showed no figure, tall, white, leaning
through the wreaths,

Tangle-twine of leaf and bloom that intercept the air one
breathes,

Interpose between one's love and Nature's loving, hill
and dale

Down to where the blue lake's wrinkle marks the river's
inrush pale

—Mazy Arve : whereon no vessel but goes sliding white
and plain,

Not a steam-boat pants from harbour but one hears
pulsate amain,

Past the city's congregated peace of homes and pomp of
spires

—Man's mild protest that there's something more than
Nature, man requires,

And that, useful as is Nature to attract the tourist's
foot,

Quiet slow sure money-making proves the matter's very
root,—

Need for body,—while the spirit also needs a comfort
reached

By no help of lake or mountain, but the texts whence
Calvin preached.

“Here's the veil withdrawn from landscape : up to Jura
and beyond,

All awaits us ranged and ready ; yet she violates the
bond,

Neither leans nor looks nor listens : why is this ? ” A
turn of eye

Took the whole sole answer, gave the undisputed reason
“ why ! ”

This dread way you had your summons ! No premoni-
tory touch,

As you talked and laughed ('t is told me) scarce a minute
ere the clutch

Captured you in cold forever. Cold ? nay, warm you
were as life

When I raised you, while the others used, in passionate
poor strife,

All the means that seemed to promise any aid, and all in
vain.

Gone you were, and I shall never see that earnest face
again

Grow transparent, grow transfigured with the sudden light
that leapt,

At the first word's provocation, from the heart-deeps
where it slept.

Therefore, paying piteous duty, what seemed you have
we consigned

Peacefully to—what I think were, of all earth-beds, to
your mind

Most the choice for quiet, yonder : low walls stop the
vines' approach,

Lovingly Salève protects you ; village-sports will ne'er
encroach

On the stranger lady's silence, whom friends bore so kind
and well

Thither "just for love's sake,"—such their own word was :
and who can tell?

You supposed that few or none had known and loved
you in the world :

May be ! flower that's full-blown tempts the butterfly,
not flower that's furred.

But more learned sense unlocked you, loosed the sheath
and let expand

Bud to bell and outspread flower-shape at the least warm
touch of hand

—May be, throb of heart, beneath which,—quicken-
ing farther than it knew,—

Treasure oft was disembosomed, scent all strange and
unguessed hue.

Disembosomed, re-embosomed,—must one memory suf-
fice,

Prove I knew an Alpine-rose which all beside named
Edelweiss?

Rare thing, red or white, you rest now : two days slum-
bered through ; and since

One day more will see me rid of this same scene whereat
I wince,

Tetchy at all sights and sounds and pettish at each idle
charm

Proffered me who pace now singly where we two went
arm in arm,—

I have turned upon my weakness : asked “And what,
forsooth, prevents

That, this latest day allowed me, I fulfil of her intents

One she had the most at heart—that we should thus
again survey

From Salève Mont Blanc together ?” Therefore,—dared
and done to-day

Climbing,—here I stand : but you—where ?

If a spirit of the place
Broke the silence, bade me question, promised answer,—
what disgrace

Did I stipulate "Provided answer suit my hopes, not
fears!"

Would I shrink to learn my life-time's limit—days,
weeks, months or years?

Would I shirk assurance on each point whereat I can
but guess—

"Does the soul survive the body? Is there God's self,
no or yes?"

If I know my mood, 't were constant—come in whatso'er
uncouth

Shape it should, nay, formidable--so the answer were
but truth.

Well, and wherefore shall it daunt me, when 't is I myself
am tasked,

When, by weakness weakness questioned, weakly
answers—weakly asked?

Weakness never needs be falseness : truth is truth in
each degree

—Thunderpealed by God to Nature, whispered by my
soul to me.

Nay, the weakness turns to strength and triumphs in a
truth beyond :

“ Mine is but man’s truest answer—how were it did God
respond ? ”

I shall no more dare to mimic such response in futile
speech,

Pass off human lisp as echo of the sphere-song out of
reach,

Than,—because it well may happen yonder, where the
far snows blanch

Mute Mont Blanc, that who stands near them sees and
hears an avalanche,—

I shall pick a clod and throw,—cry “Such the sight and
such the sound !

What though I nor see nor hear them? Others do, the
proofs abound !”

Can I make my eye an eagle’s, sharpen ear to recog-
nize

Sound o’er league and league of silence? Can I know,
who but surmise?

If I dared no self-deception when, a week since, I and
you

Walked and talked along the grass-path, passing lightly
in review

What seemed hits and what seemed misses in a certain
fence-play,—strife

Sundry minds of mark engaged in “On the Soul and
Future Life,”—

If I ventured estimating what was come of parried
thrust,

Subtle stroke, and, rightly, wrongly, estimating could be
just

—Just, though life so seemed abundant in the form
which moved by mine,

I might well have played at feigning, fooling,—laughed
“What need opine

Pleasure must succeed to pleasure else past pleasure
turns to pain,

And this first life claims a second, else I count its good
no gain?”—

Much less have I heart to palter when the matter to
decide

Now becomes “Was ending ending once and always,
when you died?”

Did the face, the form I lifted as it lay, reveal the
loss

Not alone of life but soul? A tribute to yon flowers and
moss,

What of you remains beside? A memory! Easy to
attest

“Certainly from out the world that one believes who
knew her best

Such was good in her, such fair, which fair and good
were great perchance

Had but fortune favored, bidden each shy faculty
advance;

After all—who knows another? Only as I know, I
speak.”

So much of you lives within me while I live my year or
week.

Then my fellow takes the tale up, not unwilling to
aver

Duly in his turn "I knew him best of all, as he knew
her :

Such he was, and such he was not, and such other might
have been

But that somehow every actor, somewhere in this earthly
scene,

Fails." And so both memories dwindle, yours and mine
together linked,

Till there is but left for comfort, when the last spark
proves extinct,

This—that somewhere new existence led by men and
women new

Possibly attains perfection coveted by me and
you ;

While ourselves, the only witness to what work our life
evolved,

Only to ourselves proposing problems proper to be
solved

By ourselves alone,—who working ne'er shall know if
work bear fruit

Others reap and garner, heedless how produced by stalk
and root,—

We who, darkling, timed the day's birth,—struggling,
testified to peace,—

Earned, by dint of failure, triumph,—we, creative
thought, must cease

In created word, thought's echo, due to impulse long since
sped !

Why repine ? There's ever someone lives although our-
selves be dead !

Well, what signifies repugnance? Truth is truth howe'er
it strike.

Fair or foul the lot apportioned life on earth, we bear
alike.

Stalwart body idly yoked to stunted spirit, powers, that
fain

Else would soar, condemned to grovel, groundlings
through the fleshly chain,—

Help that hinders, hindrance proved but help disguised
when all too late,—

Hindrance is the fact acknowledged, howso'er explained
as Fate,

Fortune, Providence : we bear, own life a burthen more
or less.

Life thus owned unhappy, is there supplemental happi-
ness

Possible and probable in life to come? or must we
count

Life a curse and not a blessing, summed-up in its whole
amount,

Help and hindrance, joy and sorrow?

Why should I want courage here?

I will ask and have an answer,—with no favour, with no
fear,—

From myself. How much, how little, do I inwardly
believe

True that controverted doctrine? Is it fact to which I
cleave,

Is it fancy I but cherish, when I take upon my
lips

Phrase the solemn Tuscan fashioned, and declare the
soul's eclipse

Not the soul's extinction? take his "I believe and I
declare—

Certain am I—from this life I pass into a better,
there

Where that lady lives of whom enamoured was my soul "
—where this

Other lady, my companion dear and true, she also is?

I have questioned and am answered. Question, answer
presuppose

Two points: that the thing itself which questions,
answers,—is, it knows;

As it also knows the thing perceived outside itself,—a
force

Actual ere its own beginning, operative through its
course,

Unaffected by its end,—that this thing likewise needs
must be ;

Call this—God, then, call that—soul, and both—the
only facts for me.

Prove them facts? that they o'erpass my power of
proving, proves them such :

Fact it is I know I know not something which is fact as
much.

What before caused all the causes, what effect of all
effects

Haply follows,—these are fancy. Ask the rush if it
suspects

Whence and how the stream which floats it had a rise,
and where and how

Falls or flows on still ! What answer makes the rush
except that now

Certainly it floats and is, and, no less certain than
itself,

Is the everyway external stream that now through shoal
and shelf

Floats it onward, leaves it—may be—wrecked at last, or
lands on shore

There to root again and grow and flourish stable
evermore.

—May be ! mere surmise not knowledge : much con-
jecture styled belief,

What the rush conceives the stream means through the
voyage blind and brief.

Why, because I doubtless am, shall I as doubtless be ?

“ Because

God seems good and wise.” Yet under this our life’s
apparent laws

Reigns a wrong which, righted once, would give quite
other laws to life.

“He seems potent.” Potent here, then : why are right
and wrong at strife?

Has in life the wrong the better? Happily life ends so
soon !

Right predominates in life? Then why two lives and
double boon?

“Anyhow, we want it : wherefore want?” Because, with-
out the want,

Life, now human, would be brutish : just that hope, how-
ever scant,

Makes the actual life worth leading ; take the hope
therein away,

All we have to do is surely not endure another
day.

This life has its hopes for this life, hopes that promise
joy : life done—

Out of all the hopes, how many had complete fulfilment ?
none.

“ But the soul is not the body : ” and the breath is not
the flute ;

Both together make the music : either marred and all is
mute.

Truce to such old sad contention whence, according as
we shape

Most of hope or most of fear, we issue in a half-
escape :

“ We believe ” is sighed. I take the cup of comfort
proffered thus,

Taste and try each soft ingredient, sweet infusion, and
discuss

What their blending may accomplish for the cure of
doubt, till—slow,

Sorrowful, but how decided ! needs must I o’return it—
so !

Cause before, effect behind me—blanks ! The midway
point I am,

Caused, itself—itself efficient : in that narrow space
must cram

All experience—out of which there crowds conjecture
manifold,

But, as knowledge, this comes only—things may be as I
behold,

Or may not be, but, without me and above me, things
there are ;

I myself am what I know not—ignorance which proves
no bar

To the knowledge that I am, and, since I am, can
recognize

What to me is pain and pleasure : this is sure, the rest—
surmise.

If my fellows are or are not, what may please them and
what pain,—

Mere surmise : my own experience—that is knowledge,
once again !

I have lived, then, done and suffered, loved and hated,
learnt and taught

This—there is no reconciling wisdom with a world dis-
traught,

Goodness with triumphant evil, power with failure in the
aim,

If—(to my own sense, remember ! though none other
feel the same !) —

If you bar me from assuming earth to be a pupil's
place,

And life, time,—with all their chances, changes,—just
probation-space,

Mine, for me. But those apparent other mortals—theirs,
for them?

Knowledge stands on my experience : all outside its
narrow hem,

Free surmise may sport and welcome ! Pleasures, pains
affect mankind

Just as they affect myself? Why, here's my neighbour
colour-blind,

Eyes like mine to all appearance : “green as grass” do
I affirm?

“Red as grass” he contradicts me—which employs the
proper term?

Were we two the earth's sole tenants, with no third for
referee,

How should I distinguish? Just so, God must judge
'twixt man and me.

To each mortal peradventure earth becomes a new
machine,

Pain and pleasure no more tally in our sense than red
and green ;

Still, without what seems such mortal's pleasure, pain,
my life were lost

—Life, my whole sole chance to prove—although at man's
apparent cost—

What is beauteous and what ugly, right to strive for,
right to shun,

Fit to help and fit to hinder,—prove my forces every-
one,

Good and evil,—learn life's lesson, hate of evil, love of
good,

As 't is set me, understand so much as may be under-
stood—

Solve the problem : “ From thine apprehended scheme
of things, deduce

Praise or blame of its contriver, shown a niggard or
profuse

In each good or evil issue ! nor miscalculate
alike

Counting one the other in the final balance, which to
strike,

Soul was born and life allotted : ay, the show of things
unfurled

For thy summing-up and judgment,—thine, no other
mortal's world ! ”

What though fancy scarce may grapple with the complex
and immense

—"His own world for every mortal?" Postulate omnipotence!

Limit power, and simple grows the complex: shrunk to
atom size,

That which loomed immense to fancy low before my
reason lies,—

I survey it and pronounce it work like other work:
success

Here and there, the workman's glory,—here and there,
his shame no less,

Failure as conspicuous. Taunt not "Human work ape
work divine?"

As the power, expect performance! God's be God's as
mine is mine!

God whose power made man and made man's wants, and
made, to meet those wants,

Heaven and earth which, through the body, prove the
spirit's ministrants,

Excellently all,—did he lack power or was the will in
fault

When he let blue heaven be shrouded o'er by vapours
of the vault,

Gay earth drop her garlands shrivelled at the first infecting
breath

Of the serpent pains which herald, swarming in, the
dragon death?

What, no way but this that man may learn and lay to
heart how rife

Life were with delights would only death allow their taste
to life?

Must the rose sigh "Pluck—I perish!" must the eve
weep "Gaze—I fade!"

—Every sweet warn "'Ware my bitter!" every shine bid
"Wait my shade?"

Can we love but on condition, that the thing we love
must die?

Needs there groan a world in anguish just to teach us
sympathy—

Multitudinously wretched that we, wretched too, may
guess

What a preferable state were universal happiness?

Hardly do I so conceive the outcome of that power
which went

To the making of the worm there in yon clod its
tenement,

Any more than I distinguish aught of that which, wise
and good,

Framed the leaf, its plain of pasture, dropped the dew,
its fineless food.

Nay, were fancy fact, were earth and all it holds illusion
mere,

Only a machine for teaching love and hate and hope and
fear

To myself, the sole existence, single truth mid falsehood,
—well !

If the harsh throes of the prelude die not off into the
swell

Of that perfect piece they sting me to become a-strain
for,—if

Roughness of the long rock-clamber lead not to the last
of cliff,

First of level country where is sward my pilgrim-foot can
prize,—

Plainlier ! if this life's conception new life fail to
realize,—

Though earth burst and proved a bubble glassing hues
of hell, one huge

Reflex of the devil's doings—God's work by no subter-
fuge—

(So death's kindly touch informed me as it broke the
glamour, gave

Soul and body both release from life's long nightmare in
the grave)

Still,—with no more Nature, no more Man as riddle to
be read,

Only my own joys and sorrows now to reckon real
instead,—

I must say—or choke in silence—“Howsoever came my
fate,

Sorrow did and joy did nowise,—life well weighed,—
preponderate.”

By necessity ordained thus? I shall bear as best I can ;
By a cause all-good, all-wise, all-potent? No, as I am man !
Such were God : and was it goodness that the good
within my range

Or had evil in admixture or grew evil's self by change ?
Wisdom—that becoming wise meant making slow and
sure advance

From a knowledge proved in error to acknowledged
ignorance ?

Power? 't is just the main assumption reason most revolts
at ! power

Unavailing for bestowment on its creature of an hour,

Man, of so much proper action rightly aimed and reaching aim,

So much passion,—no defect there, no excess, but still the same,—

As what constitutes existence, pure perfection bright as brief

For yon worm, man's fellow-creature, on yon happier world—its leaf !

No, as I am man, I mourn the poverty I must impute :
Goodness, wisdom, power, all bounded, each a human attribute !

But, O world outspread beneath me ! only for myself I speak,

Nowise dare to play the spokesman for my brothers strong and weak,

Full and empty, wise and foolish, good and bad, in every
age,

Every clime, I turn my eyes from, as in one or other
stage

Of a torture writhe they, Job-like couched on dung and
crazed with blains

—Wherefore? whereto? ask the whirlwind what the
dread voice thence explains !

I shall “vindicate no way of God’s to man,” nor stand
apart,

“Laugh, be candid,” while I watch it traversing the human
heart !

Traversed heart must tell its story uncommented on : no
less

Mine results in “Only grant a second life, I
acquiesce

In this present life as failure, count misfortune's worst
assaults

Triumph, not defeat, assured that loss so much the more
exalts

Gain about to be. For at what moment did I so
advance

Near to knowledge as when frustrate of escape from
ignorance?

Did not beauty prove most precious when its opposite
obtained

Rule, and truth seem more than ever potent because false-
hood reigned?

While for love—Oh how but, losing love, does whoso
loves succeed

By the death-pang to the birth-throe—learning what is
love indeed?

Only grant my soul may carry high through death her
cup unspilled,

Brimming though it be with knowledge, life's loss drop
by drop distilled,

I shall boast it mine—the balsam, bless each kindly
wrench that wrung

From life's tree its inmost virtue, tapped the root whence
pleasure sprung,

Barked the bole, and broke the bough, and bruised the
berry, left all grace

Ashes in death's stern alembic, loosed elixir in its place !

Witness, Dear and True, how little I was 'ware of—not
your worth

—That I knew, my heart assures me—but of what a
shade on earth

Would the passage from my presence of the tall white
figure throw

O'er the ways we walked together ! Somewhat narrow,
somewhat slow,

Used to seem the ways, the walking : narrow ways are
well to tread

When there's moss beneath the footstep, honeysuckle
overhead :

Walking slow to beating bosom surest solace soonest
gives,

Liberates the brain o'erloaded—best of all restora-
tives.

Nay, do I forget the open vast where soon or late con-
verged

Ways though winding?—world-wide heaven-high sea
where music slept or surged

As the angel had ascendant, and Beethoven's Titan
mace

Smote the immense to storm, Mozart would by a finger's
lifting chase ?

Yes, I knew—but not with knowledge such as thrills me
while I view

Yonder precinct which henceforward holds and hides the
Dear and True.

Grant me (once again) assurance we shall each meet
each some day,

Walk—but with how bold a footstep ! on a way—but
what a way !

—Worst were best, defeat were triumph, utter loss were
utmost gain.

Can it be, and must, and will it ?

Silence ! Out of fact's domain,

Just surmise prepared to mutter hope, and also fear—
dispute

Fact's inexorable ruling "Outside fact, surmise be mute!"

Well!

Ay, well and best, if fact's self I may force the
answer from!

'T is surmise I stop the mouth of! Not above in yonder
dome

All a rapture with its rose-glow,—not around, where pile
and peak

Strainingly await the sun's fall,—not beneath, where
crickets creak,

Birds assemble for their bed-time, soft the tree-top swell
subsides,—

No, nor yet within my deepest sentient self the know-
ledge hides!

Aspiration, reminiscence, plausibilities of trust

—Now the ready “Man were wronged else,” now the rash
“and God unjust”—

None of these I need ! Take thou, my soul, thy solitary
stand,

Umpire to the champions Fancy, Reason, as on either
hand

Amicable war they wage and play the foe in thy behoof !

Fancy thrust and Reason parry ! Thine the prize who
stand aloof !

FANCY.

I concede the thing refused : henceforth no certainty
more plain

Than this mere surmise that after body dies soul lives
again.

Two, the only facts acknowledged late, are now increased
to three—

God is, and the soul is, and, as certain, after death
shall be.

Put this third to use in life, the time for using fact !

REASON.

I do :

Find it promises advantage, coupled with the other two.
Life to come will be improvement on the life that's now ;
destroy

Body's thwartings, there's no longer screen betwixt soul
and soul's joy.

Why should we expect new hindrance, novel tether ? In
this first

Life, I see the good of evil, why our world began at
worst :

Since time means amelioration, tardily enough displayed,

Yet a mainly onward moving, never wholly retrograde.

We know more though we know little, we grow stronger though still weak,

Partly see though all too purblind, stammer though we cannot speak.

There is no such grudge in God as scared the ancient Greek, no fresh

Substitute of trap for dragnet, once a breakage in the mesh.

Dragons were, and serpents are, and blindworms will be :
ne'er emerged

Any new-created Python for man's plague since earth was purged.

Failing proof, then, of invented trouble to replace the
old,

O'er this life the next presents advantage much and
manifold :

Which advantage—in the absence of a fourth and farther
fact

Now conceivably surmised, of harm to follow from the
act—

I pronounce for man's obtaining at this moment. Why
delay?

Is he happy? happiness will change : anticipate the
day !

Is he sad? there's ready refuge : of all sadness death's
prompt cure !

Is he both, in mingled measure? cease a burthen to
endure !

Pains with sorry compensations, pleasures stinted in the
dole,

Power that sinks and pettiness that soars, all halved and
nothing whole,

Idle hopes that lure man onward, forced back by as idle
fears—

What a load he stumbles under through his glad sad
seventy years,

When a touch sets right the turmoil, lifts his spirit where,
flesh-freed,

Knowledge shall be rightly named so, all that seems be
truth indeed !

Grant his forces no accession, nay, no faculty's increase,
Only let what now exists continue, let him prove in
peace

Power whereof the interrupted unperfected play enticed

Man through darkness, which to lighten any spark of
hope sufficed,—

What shall then deter his dying out of darkness into light?
Death itself perchance, brief pain that's pang, condensed
and infinite?

But at worst, he needs must brave it one day, while, at
best, he laughs—

Drops a drop within his chalice, sleep not death his
science quaffs!

Any moment claims more courage when, by crossing cold
and gloom,

Manfully man quits discomfort, makes for the provided
room

Where the old friends want their fellow, where the new
acquaintance wait,

Probably for talk assembled, possibly to sup in state!

I affirm and re-affirm it therefore : only make as plain
As that man now lives, that after dying man will live
again,—

Make as plain the absence, also, of a law to contravene
Voluntary passage from this life to that by change of
scene,—

And I bid him—at suspicion of first cloud athwart his
sky,

Flower's departure, frost's arrival—never hesitate, but
die !

FANCY.

Then I double my concession : grant, along with new
life sure,

This same law found lacking now : ordain that, whether
rich or poor

Present life is judged in aught man counts advantage—

be it hope,

Be it fear that brightens, blackens most or least his

horoscope,—

He, by absolute compulsion such as made him live

at all,

Go on living to the fated end of life whate'er be-

fall.

What though, as on earth he darkling grovels, man descry

the sphere,

Next life's—call it, heaven of freedom, close above and

crystal-clear ?

He shall find—say, hell to punish who in aught curtails

the term,

Fain would act the butterfly before he has played out the

worm !

God, soul, earth, heaven, hell,—five facts now : what is
to desiderate?

REASON.

Nothing ! Henceforth man's existence bows to the
monition "Wait !

Take the joys and bear the sorrows—neither with extreme
concern !

Living here means nescience simply : 't is next life that
helps to learn.

Shut those eyes, next life will open,—stop those ears,
next life will teach

Hearing's office,—close those lips, next life will give the
power of speech !

Or, if action more amuse thee than the passive at-
titude,

Bravely bustle through thy being, busy thee for ill or good,
Reap this life's success or failure ! Soon shall things be
unperplexed

And the right and wrong, now tangled, lie unravelled in
the next."

FANCY.

Not so fast ! Still more concession ! not alone do I
declare

Life must needs be borne,—I also will that man become
aware

Life has worth incalculable, every moment that he
spends

So much gain or loss for that next life which on this life
depends.

Good, done here, be there rewarded,—evil, worked here,
there amerced !

Six facts now, and all established, plain to man the last
as first.

REASON.

There was good and evil, then, defined to man by this
decree ?

Was—for at its promulgation both alike have ceased
to be.

Prior to this last announcement “Certainly as God
exists,

As he made man’s soul, as soul is quenchless by the
deathly mists,

Yet is, all the same, forbidden premature escape from
time

To eternity’s provided purer air and brighter clime,—

Just so certainly depends it on the use to which man
turns

Earth, the good or evil done there, whether after death
he earns

Life eternal,—heaven, the phrase be, or eternal death,—
say, hell.

As his deeds, so proves his portion, doing ill or doing
well !”

—Prior to this last announcement, earth was man’s,
probation-place :

Liberty of doing evil gave his doing good a
grace ;

Once lay down the law, with Nature’s simple “Such
effects succeed

Causes such, and heaven or hell depends upon man’s
earthly deed

Just as surely as depends the straight or else the crooked
line

On his making point meet point or with or else without
incline,"—

Thenceforth neither good nor evil does man, doing what
he must.

Lay but down that law as stringent "Would'st thou live
again, be just !"

As this other "Would'st thou live now, regularly draw
thy breath !

For, suspend the operation, straight law's breach results
in death—"

And (provided always, man, addressed this mode, be
sound and sane)

Prompt and absolute obedience, never doubt, will law
obtain !

Tell not me "Look round us ! nothing each side but
acknowledged law,

Now styled God's—now, Nature's edict !" Where's
obedience without flaw

Paid to either ? What's the adage rife in man's mouth ?
Why, "The best

I both see and praise, the worst I follow"—which, despite
professed

Seeing, praising, all the same he follows, since he dis-
believes

In the heart of him that edict which for truth his head
receives.

There's evading and persuading and much making law
amends

Somehow, there's the nice distinction 'twixt fast foes and
faulty friends,

—Any consequence except inevitable death when

“ Die,

Whoso breaks our law ! ” they publish, God and Nature
equally.

Law that's kept or broken—subject to man's will and
pleasure ! Whence ?

How comes law to bear eluding ? Not because of im-
potence :

Certain laws exist already which to hear means to
obey ;

Therefore not without a purpose these man must, while
those man may

Keep and, for the keeping, haply gain approval and
reward.

Break through this last superstructure, all is empty air—
no sward

Firm like my first fact to stand on "God there is, and
soul there is,"

And soul's earthly life-allotment: wherein, by hypothesis,
Soul is bound to pass probation, prove its powers, and
exercise

Sense and thought on fact, and then, from fact educing
fit surmise,

Ask itself, and of itself have solely answer, "Does the
scope

Earth affords of fact to judge by warrant future fear or
hope?"

Thus have we come back full circle: fancy's footsteps
one by one

Go their round conducting reason to the point where
they begun,

Left where we were left so lately, Dear and True !

When, half a week

Since, we walked and talked and thus I told you, how

suffused a cheek

You had turned me had I sudden brought the blush into

the smile

By some word like "Idly argued ! you know better all

the while !"

Now, from me—Oh not a blush but, how much more,

a joyous glow,

Laugh triumphant, would it strike did your "Yes, better

I do know "

Break, my warrant for assurance ! which assurance may

not be

If, supplanting hope, assurance needs must change this

life to me.

So, I hope—no more than hope, but hope—no less than
hope, because

I can fathom, by no plumb-line sunk in life's apparent
laws,

How I may in any instance fix where change should
meetly fall

Nor involve, by one revisal, abrogation of them
all

—Which again involves as utter change in life thus law-
released,

Whence the good of goodness vanished when the ill of
evil ceased.

Whereas, life and laws apparent re-instated,—all we
know,

All we know not,—o'er our heaven again cloud closes,
until, lo—

Hope the arrowy, just as constant, comes to pierce its
gloom, compelled

By a power and by a purpose which, if no one else beheld,
I behold in life, so—hope !

Sad summing-up of all to say !

Athanasius contra mundum, why should he hope more
than they ?

So are men made notwithstanding, such magnetic virtue
darts

From each head their fancy haloes to their unresisting
hearts !

Here I stand, methinks a stone's throw from yon village
I this morn

Traversed for the sake of looking one last look at its
forlorn

Tenement's ignoble fortune : through a crevice, plain its
floor

Piled with provender for cattle, while a dung-heap blocked
the door.

In that squalid Bossex, under that obscene red roof,
arose,

Like a fiery flying serpent from its egg, a soul—
Rousseau's.

Turn thence ! Is it Diodati joins the glimmer of the
lake?

There I plucked a leaf, one week since,—ivy, plucked
for Byron's sake.

Famed unfortunates ! And yet, because of that phos-
phoric fame

Swathing blackness' self with brightness till putridity
looked flame,

All the world was witched : and wherefore ? what could
lie beneath, allure

Heart of man to let corruption serve man's head as cyno-
sure ?

Was the magic in the dictum " All that's good is gone
and past ;

Bad and worse still grows the present, and the worst of
all comes last :

Which believe—for I believe it ?" So preached one his
gospel-news ;

While melodious moaned the other " Dying day with
dolphin-hues !

Storm, for loveliness and darkness like a woman's eye !
Ye mounts

Where I climb to 'scape my fellow, and thou sea wherein
he counts

Not one inch of vile dominion ! What were your especial
worth

Failed ye to enforce the maxim ' Of all objects found on
earth

Man is meanest, much too honored when compared
with—what by odds

Beats him—any dog : so, let him go a-howling to his
gods !'

Which believe—for I believe it !" such the comfort man
received

Sadly since perforce he must : for why ? the famous bard
believed !

Fame ! Then, give me fame, a moment ! As I gather at
a glance

Human glory after glory vivifying yon expanse,

Let me grasp them altogether, hold on high and brandish
well

Beacon-like above the rapt world ready, whether heaven
or hell

Send the dazzling summons downward, to submit itself
the same,

Take on trust the hope or else despair flashed full on
face by—Fame !

Thanks, thou pine-tree of Makistos, wide thy giant torch
I wave !

Know ye whence I plucked the pillar, late with sky for
architrave ?

This the trunk, the central solid Knowledge, kindled core,
began

Tugging earth-deeps, trying heaven-heights, rooted yonder
at Lausanne.

This which flits and spits, the aspic,—sparkles in and out
the boughs

Now, and now condensed, the python, coiling round and
round allows

Scarce the bole its due effulgence, dulled by flake on
flake of Wit—

Laughter so bejewels Learning,—what but Ferney
nourished it?

Nay, nor fear—since every resin feeds the flame—that I
dispense

With yon Bossex terebinth-tree's all-explosive Elo-
quence :

No, be sure ! nor, any more than thy resplendency, Jean-
Jacques,

Dare I want thine, Diodati ! What though monkeys and
macaques

Gibber "Byron?" Byron's ivy rears a branch beyond
the crew,

Green for ever, no deciduous trash macaques and mon-
keys chew !

As Rousseau, then, eloquent, as Byron prime in poet's
power,—

Detonations, fulgurations, smiles—the rainbow, tears—
the shower,—

Lo, I lift the corruscating marvel—Fame ! and, famed,
declare

—Learned for the nonce as Gibbon, witty as wit's self
Voltaire . . .

O the sorriest of conclusions to whatever man of
sense

Mid the millions stands the unit, takes no flare for
evidence !

Yet the millions have their portion, live their calm or
troubled day,

Find significance in fireworks : so, by help of mine, they
may

Confidently lay to heart and lock in head their life long—
this :

“ He there with the brand flamboyant, broad o’er night’s
forlorn abyss,

Crowned by prose and verse ; and wielding, with Wit’s
bauble, Learning’s rod . . .

Well? Why, he at least believed in Soul, was very sure
of God !

So the poor smile played, that evening : pallid smile long
since extinct

Here in London's mid-November ! Not so loosely
thoughts were linked,

Six weeks since as I, descending in the sunset from
Salève,

Found the chain, I seemed to forge there, flawless till it
reached your grave,—

Not so filmy was the texture, but I bore it in my breast
Safe thus far. And since I found a something in me
would not rest

Till I, link by link, unravelled any tangle of the chain,
—Here it lies, for much or little ! I have lived all o'er
again

That last pregnant hour : I saved it, just as I could save
a root

Disinterred for re-interment when the time best helps to
shoot.

Life is stocked with germs of torpid life ; but may I never
wake

Those of mine whose resurrection could not be without
earthquake !

Rest all such, unraised forever ! Be this, sad yet sweet,
the sole

Memory evoked from slumber ! Least part this : then
what the whole ?

November 9, 1877.

THE
TWO POETS OF CROISIC

I.

Such a starved bank of moss
Till, that May-morn,
Blue ran the flash across :
Violets were born !

2.

Sky—what a scowl of cloud
Till, near and far,
Ray on ray split the shroud :
Splendid, a star !

3.

World—how it walled about

Life with disgrace

Till God's own smile came out :

That was thy face !

THE TWO POETS OF CROISIC.

I.

“FAME !” Yes, I said it and you read it. First,
Praise the good log-fire ! Winter howls without.
Crowd closer, let us ! Ha, the secret nursed
Inside yon hollow, crusted roundabout
With copper where the clamp was,—how the burst
Vindicates flame the stealthy feeder ! Spout
Thy splendidest—a minute and no more ?
So soon again all sobered as before ?

2.

Nay, for I need to see your face ! One stroke
Adroitly dealt, and lo, the pomp revealed !
Fire in his pandemonium, heart of oak
Palatial, where he wrought the works concealed
Beneath the solid seeming roof I broke,
As redly up and out and off they reeled
Like disconcerted imps, those thousand sparks
From fire's slow tunnelling of vaults and arcs !

3.

Up, out, and off, see ! Were you never used,—
You now, in childish days or rather nights,—
As I was, to watch sparks fly ? not amused
By that old nurse-taught game which gave the sprites
Each one his title and career,—confused

Belief 't was all long over with the flights
From earth to heaven of hero, sage and bard,
And bade them once more strive for Fame's award ?

4.

New long bright life ! and happy chance befell—

That I know—when some prematurely lost
Child of disaster bore away the bell

From some too-pampered son of fortune, crossed
Never before my chimney broke the spell !

Octogenarian Keats gave up the ghost,
While—never mind Who was it cumbered earth—
Sank stifled, span-long brightness, in the birth.

5.

Well, try a variation of the game !

Our log is old ship-timber, broken bulk.

There's sea-brine spirits up the brimstone flame,
That crimson-curly spiral proves the hulk
Was saturate with—ask the chloride's name
From somebody who knows ! I shall not sulk
If yonder greenish tonguelet licked from brass
Its life, I thought was fed on copperas.

6.

Anyhow, there they flutter ! What may be
The style and prowess of that purple one ?
Who is the hero other eyes shall see
Than yours and mine ? That yellow, deep to dun—
Conjecture how the sage glows, whom not we
But those unborn are to get warmth by ! Son
O' the coal,—as Job and Hebrew name a spark,—
What bard, in thy red soaring, scares the dark ?

7.

Oh and the lesser lights, the dearer still

That they elude a vulgar eye, give ours

The glimpse repaying astronomic skill

Which searched sky deeper, passed those patent powers

Constellate proudly,—swords, scrolls, harps, that fill

The vulgar eye to surfeit,—found best flowers

Hid deepest in the dark,—named unplucked grace

Of soul, ungathered beauty, form or face !

8.

Up with thee, mouldering ash men never knew,

But I know ! flash thou forth, and figure bold,

Calm and columnar as yon flame I view !

Oh and I bid thee,—to whom fortune doled

Scantly all other gifts out—bicker blue,

Beauty for all to see, zinc's uncontrolled
Flake-brilliance ! Not my fault if these were shown,
Grandeur and beauty both, to me alone.

9.

No ! as the first was boy's play, this proves mere
Stripling's amusement : manhood's sport be grave !
Choose rather sparkles quenched in mid career,
True boldness and true brightness could not save
(In some old night of time on some lone drear
Sea-coast, monopolized by crag or cave)
—Save from ignoble exit into smoke,
Silence, oblivion, all death-damps that choke !

10.

Launched by our ship-wood, float we, once adrift,
In fancy to that land-strip waters wash,

We both know well ! Where uncouth tribes made shift
Long since to keep the life in billows dash
Right over ; still they shudder at each lift
Of the old tyrant tempest's whirlwind-lash
Though they have built the serviceable town
Tempests but tease now, billows drench, not drown.

II.

Croisic, the spit of sandy rock which juts
Spitefully northward, bears nor tree nor shrub
To tempt the ocean, show what Guérande shuts
Behind her, past wild Batz whose Saxons grub
The ground for crystals grown where ocean gluts
Their promontory's breadth with salt : all stub
Of rock and stretch of sand, the land's last strife
To rescue just a remnant for dear life.

12.

And what life ! Here was, from the world to choose,
The Druids' chosen chief of homes : they reared
—Only their women,—mid the slush and ooze
Of yon low islet,—to their sun, revered
In strange stone guise,—a temple. May-dawn dews
Saw the old structure levelled ; when there peered
May's earliest eve-star, high and wide once more
Up towered the new pile perfect as before :

13.

Seeing that priestesses—and all were such—
Unbuilt and then rebuilt it every May,
Each alike helping—well, if not too much !
For, mid their eagerness to outstrip day
And get work done, if any loosed her clutch

And let a single stone drop, straight a prey
Herself fell, torn to pieces, limb from limb,
By sisters in full chorus glad and grim.

14.

And still so much remains of that grey cult,
That even now, of nights, do women steal
To the sole Menhir standing, and insult
The antagonistic church-spire by appeal
To power discrowned in vain, since each adult
Believes the gruesome thing she clasps may heal
Whatever plague no priestly help can cure :
Kiss but the cold stone, the event is sure !

15.

Nay more : on May-morns, that primeval rite
Of temple-building, with its punishment

For rash precipitation, lingers, spite
Of all remonstrance ; vainly are they shent,
Those girls who form a ring and, dressed in white,
Dance round it, till some sister's strength be spent :
Touch but the Menhir, straight the rest turn roughs
From gentles, fall on her with fisticuffs.

16.

Oh and, for their part, boys from door to door
Sing unintelligible words to tunes
As obsolete : “ scraps of Druidic lore,”
Sigh scholars, as each pale man importunes
Vainly the mumbling to speak plain once more.
Enough of this old worship, rounds and runes !
They serve my purpose, which is just to show
Croisic to-day and Croisic long ago.

17.

What have we sailed to see, then, wafted there
By fancy from the log that ends its days
Of much adventure 'neath skies foul or fair,
On waters rough or smooth, in this good blaze
We two crouch round so closely, bidding care
Keep outside with the snow-storm? Something says
“Fit time for story-telling!” I begin—
Why not at Croisic, port we first put in?

18.

Anywhere serves : for point me out the place
Wherever man has made himself a home,
And there I find the story of our race
In little, just at Croisic as at Rome.
What matters the degree? the kind I trace.

Druids their temple, Christians have their dome :
So with mankind ; and Croisic, I'll engage,
With Rome yields sort for sort, in age for age.

19.

No doubt, men vastly differ : and we need

Some strange exceptional benevolence
Of nature's sunshine to develop seed

So well, in the less-favoured clime, that thence
We may discern how shrub means tree indeed

Though dwarfed till scarcely shrub in evidence.
Man in the ice-house and the hot-house ranks
With beasts or gods : stove-forced, give warmth the
thanks !

20.

While, is there any ice-checked ? Such shall learn
I am thankworthy, who propose to slake

His thirst for tasting how it feels to turn
Cedar from hyssop-on-the-wall. I wake
No memories of what is harsh and stern
In ancient Croisic-nature, much less rake
The ashes of her last warmth till out leaps
Live Hervé Riel, the single spark she keeps.

21.

Take these two, see, each outbreak,—spirt and spirt
Of fire from our brave billet's either edge
Which call maternal Croisic ocean-girt!—
These two shall thoroughly redeem my pledge.
One flames fierce gules, its feebler rival—vert,
Heralds would tell you : heroes, I allege,
They both were : soldiers, sailors, statesmen, priests,
Lawyers, physicians—guess what gods or beasts !

22.

None of them all, but—poets, if you please !

“ What, even there, endowed with knack of rhyme,
Did two among the aborigines

Of that rough region pass the ungracious time
Suiting, to rumble-tumble of the sea’s,

The songs forbidden a serener clime ?
Or had they universal audience—that’s
To say, the folk of Croisic, ay and Batz ? ”

23.

Open your ears ! Each poet in his day

Had such a mighty moment of success
As pinnacled him straight, in full display,

For the whole world to worship—nothing less !
Was not the whole polite world Paris, pray ?

And did not Paris, for one moment—yes,
Worship these poet-flames, our red and green,
One at a time, a century between?

24.

And yet you never heard their names ! Assist,
Clio, Historic Muse, while I record
Great deeds ! Let fact, not fancy, break the mist
And bid each sun emerge, in turn play lord
Of day, one moment ! Hear the annalist
Tell a strange story, true to the least word !
At Croisic, sixteen hundred years and ten
Since Christ, forth flamed yon liquid ruby, then.

25.

Know him henceforth as René Gentilhomme
—Appropriate appellation ! noble birth

And knightly blazon, the device wherefrom
Was "Better do than say"! In Croisic's dearth
Why prison his career while Christendom
Lay open to reward acknowledged worth?
He therefore left it at the proper age
And got to be the Prince of Condé's page.

26.

Which Prince of Condé, whom men called "The Duke,"
—Failing the king, his cousin, of an heir,
(As one might hold would hap, without rebuke,
Since Anne of Austria, all the world was 'ware,
Twenty-three years long sterile, scarce could look
For issue)—failing Louis of so rare
A godsend, it was natural the Prince
Should hear men call him "Next King" too, nor wince.

27.

Now, as this reasonable hope, by growth
Of years, nay, tens of years, looked plump almost
To bursting,—would the brothers, childless both,
Louis and Gaston, give but up the ghost—
Condé, called “Duke” and “Next King,” nothing loth
Awaited his appointment to the post,
And wiled away the time, as best he might,
Till providence should settle things aright.

28.

So, at a certain pleasure-house, withdrawn
From cities where a whisper breeds offence,
He sat him down to watch the streak of dawn
Testify to first stir of providence ;
And, since dull country life makes courtiers yawn,

There wanted not a poet to dispense
Song's remedy for spleen-fits all and some,
Which poet was Page René Gentilhomme.

29.

A poet born and bred, his very sire
A poet also, author of a piece
Printed and published, "Ladies—their attire":
Therefore the son, just born at his decease,
Was bound to keep alive the sacred fire,
And kept it, yielding moderate increase
Of songs and sonnets, madrigals, and much
Rhyming thought poetry and praised as such.

30.

Rubbish unutterable (bear in mind !)
Rubbish not wholly without value, though,

Being to compliment the Duke designed

And bring the complimenter credit so,—

Pleasure with profit happily combined.

Thus René Gentilhomme rhymed, rhymed till—lo,

This happened, as he sat in an alcove

Elaborating rhyme for “love”—*not* “dove.”

31.

He was alone : silence and solitude

Befit the votary of the Muse. Around,

Nature—not our new picturesque and rude,

But trim tree-cinctured stately garden-ground—

Breathed polish and politeness. All-imbued

With these, he sat absorbed in one profound

Excogitation “Were it best to hint

Or boldly boast ‘She loves me,—Araminte?’”

32.

When suddenly flashed lightning, searing sight

Almost, so close his eyes ; then, quick on flash,

Followed the thunder, splitting earth downright

Where René sat a-rhyming : with huge crash

Of marble into atoms infinite—

Marble which, stately, dared the world to dash

The stone-thing proud, high-pillared, from its place :

One flash, and dust was all that lay at base.

33.

So, when the horrible confusion loosed

Its wrappage round his senses, and, with breath,

Seeing and hearing by degrees induced

Conviction what he felt was life, not death—

His fluttered faculties came back to roost

One after one, as fowls do : ay, beneath,

About his very feet there, lay in dust

Earthly presumption paid by heaven's disgust.

34.

For, what might be the thunder-smitten thing

But, pillared high and proud, in marble guise,

A ducal crown—which meant “Now Duke : Next,
King?”

Since such the Prince was, not in his own eyes

Alone, but all the world's. Pebble from sling

Prostrates a giant ; so can pulverize

Marble pretension—how much more, make moult

His plume, a peacock-prince—God's thunderbolt !

35.

That was enough for René, that first fact

Thus flashed into him. Up he looked : all blue
And bright the sky above ; earth firm, compact

Beneath his footing, lay apparent too ;
Opposite stood the pillar : nothing lacked

There, but the Duke's crown : see, its fragments strew
The earth,—about his feet lie atoms fine
Where he sat nursing late his fourteenth line !

36.

So, for the moment, all the universe

Being abolished, all 'twixt God and him,—
Earth's praise or blame, its blessing or its curse,
Of one and the same value,—to the brim

Flooded with truth for better or for worse,—

He pounces on the writing-paper, prim

Keeping its place on table : not a dint

Nor speck had damaged “ Ode to Araminte.”

37.

And over the neat crowquill calligraph

His pen goes blotting, blurring, as an ox

Tramples a flower-bed in a garden,—laugh

You may !—so does not he, whose quick heart knocks
Audibly at his breast : an epitaph

On earth's break-up, amid the falling rocks,

He might be penning in a wild dismay,

Caught with his work half-done on Judgment Day.

38.

And what is it so terribly he pens,
Ruining "Cupid, Venus, wile and smile,
Hearts, darts," and all his day's *divinior mens*
Judged necessary to a perfect style?
Little reck's René, with a breast to cleanse,
Of Rhadamanthine law that reigned erewhile :
Brimful of truth, truth's outburst will convince
(Style or nò style) who bears truth's brunt—the Prince.

39.

"Condé, called 'Duke,' be called just 'Duke,' not more,
To life's end ! 'Next King' thou forsooth wilt be ?
Ay, when this bauble, as it decked before

Thy pillar, shall again, for France to see,
Take its proud station there ! Let France adore
No longer an illusive mock-sun—thee—
But keep her homage for Sol's self, about
To rise and put pretenders to the rout !

40.

“What? France so God-abandoned that her root
Regal, though many a Spring it gave no sign,
Lacks power to make the bole, now branchless, shoot
Greenly as ever? Nature, though benign,
Confuses the ambitious and astute.
In store for such is punishment condign :
Sure as thy Duke's crown to the earth was hurled,
So sure, next year, a Dauphin glads the world !”

41.

Which penned—some forty lines to this effect—

Our René folds his paper, marches brave

Back to the mansion, luminous, erect,

Triumphant, an emancipated slave.

There stands the Prince. “How now? My Duke’s-
crown wrecked?”

What may this mean?” The answer René gave

Was—handing him the verses, with the due

Incline of body: “Sir, God’s word to you!”

42.

The Prince read, paled, was silent; all around,

The courtier-company, to whom he passed

The paper, read, in equal silence bound.

By degrees René also grew aghast
At his own fit of courage—palely found
Way of retreat from that pale presence : classed
Once more among the cony-kind. “ Oh, son,
It is a feeble folk ! ” saith Solomon.

43.

Vainly he apprehended evil : since,
When, at the year's end, even as foretold,
Forth came the Dauphin who discrowned the Prince
Of that long-craved mere visionary gold,
'T was no fit time for envy to evince
Malice, be sure ! The timidest grew bold :
Of all that courtier-company not one
But left the semblance for the actual sun.

44.

And all sorts and conditions that stood by
At René's burning moment, bright escape
Of soul, bore witness to the prophecy.

Which witness took the customary shape
Of verse ; a score of poets in full cry

Hailed the inspired one. Nantes and Tours agape,
Soon Paris caught the infection ; gaining strength,
How could it fail to reach the Court at length ?

45.

“O poet !” smiled King Louis “and besides,
O prophet ! Sure, by miracle announced,
My babe will prove a prodigy. Who chides

Henceforth the unchilded monarch shall be trounced
For irreligion : since the fool derides
Plain miracle by which this prophet pounced
Exactly on the moment I should lift
Like Simeon, in my arms, a babe, ' God's gift ! '

46.

" So call the boy ! and call this bard and seer

By a new title ! him I raise to rank
Of ' Royal Poet : ' poet without peer !

Whose fellows only have themselves to thank
If humbly they must follow in the rear

My René. He's the master : they must clank
Their chains of song, confessed his slaves ; for why ?
They poetize, while he can prophesy ! "

47.

So said, so done ; our René rose august,
 “The Royal Poet ;” straightway put in type
His poem-prophecy, and (fair and just
 Procedure) added,—now that time was ripe
For proving friends did well his word to trust,—
 Those attestations, tuned to lyre or pipe,
Which friends broke out with when he dared foretell
The Dauphin’s birth : friends trusted, and did well !

48.

Moreover he got painted by Du Pré,
 Engraved by Daret also ; and prefixed
The portrait to his book : a crown of bay

Circled his brows, with rose and myrtle mixed ;
And Latin verses, lovely in their way,
Described him as “ the biforked hill betwixt :
Since he hath scaled Parnassus at one jump,
Joining the Delphic quill and Getic trump.”

49.

Whereof came . . . What, it lasts, our spirt, thus long
—The red fire? That’s the reason must excuse
My letting flicker René’s prophet-song
No longer ; for its pertinacious hues
Must fade before its fellow joins the throng
Of sparks departed up the chimney, dues
To dark oblivion. At the word, it winks,
Rallies, relapses, dwindles, dwindles, sinks !

50.

So does our poet. All this burst of fame,
Fury of favour, Royal Poetship,
Prophetship, book, verse, picture—thereof came
—Nothing ! That's why I would not let outstrip
Red his green rival flamelet : just the same
Ending in smoke waits both ! In vain we rip
The past, no further faintest trace remains
Of René to reward our pious pains.

51.

Somebody saw a portrait framed and glazed
At Croisic. “ Who may be this glorified
Mortal unheard-of hitherto ? ” amazed

That person asked the owner by his side,
Who proved as ignorant. The question raised
Provoked enquiry ; key by key was tried
On Croisic's portrait-puzzle, till back flew
The wards at one key's touch, which key was—Who

52.

The other famous poet ! Wait thy turn,
Thou green, our red's competitor ! Enough
Just now to note 't was he that itched to learn
(A hundred years ago) how fate could puff
Heaven-high (a hundred years before) then spurn
To suds so big a bubble in some huff :
Since green too found red's portrait,—having heard
Hitherto of red's rare self not one word.

53.

And he with zeal addressed him to the task

Of hunting out, by all and any means,

—Who might the brilliant bard be, born to bask

Butterfly-like in shine which kings and queens

And baby-dauphins shed? Much need to ask !

Is fame so fickle that what perks and preens

The eyed wing, one imperial minute, dips

Next sudden moment into blind eclipse?

54.

After a vast expenditure of pains,

Our second poet found the prize he sought :

Urged in his search by something that restrains

From undue triumph famed ones who have fought,
Or simply, poetizing, taxed their brains :

Something that tells such—dear is triumph bought
If it means only basking in the midst
Of fame's brief sunshine, as thou, René, didst !

55.

For, what did searching find at last but this?

Quoth somebody " I somehow somewhere seem
To think I heard one old De Chevaye is

Or was possessed of René's works ! " which gleam
Of light from out the dark proved not amiss

To track, by correspondence on the theme ;
And soon the twilight broadened into day,
For thus to question answered De Chevaye.

56.

“ True it is, I did once possess the works

 You want account of—works—to call them so,—

Comprised in one small book : the volume lurks

 (Some fifty leaves *in duodecimo*)

’Neath certain ashes which my soul it irks

 Still to remember, because long ago

That and my other rare shelf-occupants

Perished by burning of my house at Nantes.

57.

“ Yet of that book one strange particular

 Still stays in mind with me ”—and thereupon

Followed the story. “ Few the poems are ;

The book was two-thirds filled up with this one,
And sundry witnesses from near and far
That here at least was prophesying done
By prophet, so as to preclude all doubt,
Before the thing he prophesied about."

58.

That's all he knew, and all the poet learned,
And all that you and I are like to hear
Of René ; since not only book is burned
But memory extinguished,—nay, I fear,
Portrait is gone too : nowhere I discerned
A trace of it at Croisic. " Must a tear
Needs fall for that ? " you smile. " How fortune fares
With such a mediocrity, who cares ? "

59.

Well, I care—intimately care to have

Experience how a human creature felt

In after-life, who bore the burden grave

Of certainly believing God had dealt

For once directly with him : did not rave

—A maniac, did not find his reason melt

—An idiot, but went on, in peace or strife,

The world's way, lived an ordinary life.

60.

How many problems that one fact would solve !

An ordinary soul, no more, no less,

About whose life earth's common sights revolve,

On whom is brought to bear, by thunder-stress,
This fact—God tasks him, and will not absolve
Task's negligent performer! Can you guess
How such a soul,—the task performed to point,—
Goes back to life nor finds things out of joint?

61.

Does he stand stock-like henceforth? or proceed
Dizzily, yet with course straight-forward still,
Down-tramplng vulgar hindrance?—as the reed
Is crushed beneath its tramp when that blind will
Hatched in some old-world beast's brain bids it speed
Where the sun wants brute-presence to fulfil
Life's purpose in a new far zone, ere ice
Enwomb the pasture-tract its fortalice.

62.

I think no such direct plain truth consists

With actual sense and thought and what they take
To be the solid walls of life : mere mists—

How such would, at that truth's first piercing, break
Into the nullity they are !—slight lists

Wherein the puppet-champions wage, for sake
Of some mock-mistress, mimic war : laid low
At trumpet-blast, there's shown the world, one foe !

63.

No, we must play the pageant out, observe

The tourney-regulations, and regard

Success—to meet the blunted spear nor swerve,

Failure—to break no bones yet fall on sward ;
Must prove we have—not courage? well then,—nerve !
And, at the day's end, boast the crown's award—
Be warranted as promising to wield
Weapons, no sham, in a true battle-field.

64.

Meantime, our simulated thunderclaps
Which tell us counterfeited truths—these same
Are—sound, when music storms the soul, perhaps?
—Sight, beauty, every dart of every aim
That touches just, then seems, by strange relapse,
To fall effectless from the soul it came
As if to fix its own, but simply smote
And startled to vague beauty more remote?

65.

So do we gain enough—yet not too much—

Acquaintance with that outer element

Wherein there's operation (call it such !)

Quite of another kind than we the pent

On earth are proper to receive. Our hutch

Lights up at the least chink : let roof be rent—

How inmates huddle, blinded at first spasm,

Cognizant of the sun's self through the chasm !

66.

Therefore, who knows if this our René's quick

Subsidence from as sudden noise and glare

Into oblivion was impolitic ?

No doubt his soul became at once aware
That, after prophecy, the rhyming-trick
Is poor employment : human praises scare
Rather than soothe ears all a-tingle yet
With tones few hear and live, but none forget.

67.

There's our first famous poet ! Step thou forth
Second consummate songster ! See, the tongue
Of fire that typifies thee, owns thy worth
In yellow, purple mixed its green among,
No pure and simple resin from the North,
But composite with virtues that belong
To Southern culture ! Love not more than hate
Helped to a blaze . . .but I anticipate.

68.

Prepare to witness a combustion rich
And riotously splendid, far beyond
Poor René's lambent little streamer which
Only played candle to a Court grown fond
By baby-birth : this soared to such a pitch,
Alternately such colours doffed and donned,
That when I say it dazzled Paris—please
Know that it brought Voltaire upon his knees !

69.

Who did it, was a dapper gentleman,
Paul Desforges Maillard, Croisickese by birth,
Whose birth that century ended which began

By similar bestowment on our earth
Of the aforesaid René. Cease to scan
The ways of Providence ! See Croisic's dearth—
Not Paris in its plenitude—suffice
To furnish France with her best poet twice !

7c.

Till he was thirty years of age, the vein
Poetic yielded rhyme by drops and spirits :
In verses of society had lain
His talent chiefly ; but the Muse asserts
Privilege most by treating with disdain
Epics the bard mouths out, or odes he blurts
Spasmodically forth. Have people time
And patience now-a-days for thought in rhyme ?

71.

So, his achievements were the quatrain's inch
Of homage, or at most the sonnet's ell
Of admiration : welded lines with clinch
Of ending word and word, to every belle
In Croisic's bounds ; these, brisk as any finch,
He twittered till his fame had reached as well
Guérande as Batz ; but there fame stopped, for—curse
On fortune—outside lay the universe !

72.

That's Paris. Well,—why not break bounds, and send
Song onward till it echo at the gates
Of Paris whither all ambitions tend,

And end too, seeing that success there sates
The soul which hungers most for fame? Why spend
A minute in deciding, while, by Fate's
Decree, there happens to be just the prize
Proposed there, suiting souls that poetize?

73.

A prize indeed, the Academy's own self
Proposes to what bard shall best indite
A piece describing how, through shoal and shelf,
The Art of Navigation, steered aright,
Has, in our last king's reign,—the lucky elf,—
Reached, one may say, Perfection's haven quite,
And there cast anchor. At a glance one sees
The subject's crowd of capabilities !

74.

Neptune and Amphitrité ! Thetis, who

Is either Tethys or as good—both tag !

Triton can shove along a vessel too :

It 's Virgil ! Then the winds that blow or lag,—

De Maille, Vendôme, Vermandois ! Toulouse blew

Longest, we reckon : he must puff the flag

To fullest outflare ; while our lacking nymph

Be Anne of Austria, Regent o'er the lymph !

75.

Promised, performed ! Since *irritabilis gens*

Holds of the feverish impotence that strives

To stay an itch by prompt resource to pen's

Scratching itself on paper ; placid lives,
Leisurely works mark the *divinior mers* :
Bees brood above the honey in their hives ;
Gnats are the busy bustlers. Splash and scrawl,—
Completed lay thy piece, swift penman Paul !

76.

To Paris with the product ! This despatched,
One had to wait the Forty's slow and sure
Verdict, as best one might. Our penman scratched
Away perforce the itch that knows no cure
But daily paper-friction : more than matched
His first feat by a second—tribute pure
And heartfelt to the Forty when their voice
Should peal with one accord " Be Paul our choice ! "

77.

Scratch, scratch went much laudation of that sane
And sound Tribunal, delegates august
Of Phœbus and the Muses' sacred train—
Whom every poetaster tries to thrust
From where, high-throned, they dominate the Seine :
Fruitless endeavour,—fail it shall and must !
Whereof in witness have not one and all
The Forty voices pealed “ Our choice be Paul ? ”

78.

Thus Paul discounted his applause. Alack
For human expectation ! Scarcely ink
Was dry when, lo, the perfect piece came back

Rejected, shamed ! Some other poet's clink
"Thetis and Tethys" had seduced the pack
Of pedants to declare perfection's pink
A singularly poor production. "Whew !
The Forty are stark fools, I always knew !"

79.

First fury over (for Paul's race—to-wit,
Brain-vibrios—wriggle clear of protoplasm
Into minute life that's one fury-fit),
"These fools shall find a bard's enthusiasm
Comports with what should counterbalance it—
Some knowledge of the world ! No doubt, orgasm
Effects the birth of verse which, born, demands
Prosaic ministration, swaddling-bands !

80.

“Verse must be cared for at this early stage,
Handled, nay dandled even. I should play
Their game indeed if, till it grew of age,
I meekly let these dotards frown away
My bantling from the rightful heritage
Of smiles and kisses ! Let the public say
If it be worthy praises or rebukes,
My poem, from these Forty old perukes ! ”

81.

So, by a friend, who boasts himself in grace
With no less than the Chevalier La Roque,—
Eminent in those days for pride of place,

Seeing he had it in his power to block
The way or smooth the road to all the race
Of literators trudging up to knock
At Fame's exalted temple-door—for why?
He edited the Paris "Mercury :"—

82.

By this friend's help the Chevalier receives
Paul's poem, prefaced by the due appeal
To Cæsar from the Jews. As duly heaves
A sigh the Chevalier, about to deal
With case so customary—turns the leaves,
Finds nothing there to borrow, beg or steal—
Then brightens up the critic's brow deep-lined,
"The thing may be so cleverly declined !"

83.

Down to desk, out with paper, up with quill,

Dip and indite ! “ Sir, gratitude immense

For this true draught from the Pierian rill !

Our Academic clodpoles must be dense

Indeed to stand unirrigated still.

No less, we critics dare not give offence

To grandees like the Forty : while we mock,

We grin and bear. So, here’s your piece ! La Roque.”

84.

“ There now ! ” cries Paul : “ the fellow can’t avoid

Confessing that my piece deserves the palm ;

And yet he dares not grant me space enjoyed

By every scribbler he permits embalm
His crambo in the Journal's corner ! Cloyed
With stuff like theirs, no wonder if a qualm
Be caused by verse like mine : though that's no cause
For his defrauding me of just applause.

85.

“Aha, he fears the Forty, this poltroon?

First let him fear *me* ! Change smooth speech to
rough !

I'll speak my mind out, show the fellow soon

Who is the foe to dread : insist enough
On my own merits till, as clear as noon,

He sees I am no man to take rebuff
As patiently as scribblers may and must !

Quick to the onslaught, out sword, cut and thrust ! ”

86.

And thereupon a fierce epistle flings

Its challenge in the critic's face. Alack !

Our bard mistakes his man ! The gauntlet rings

On brazen visor proof against attack.

Prompt from his editorial throne up springs

The insulted magnate, and his mace falls, thwack,

On Paul's devoted brainpan,—quite away

From common courtesies of fencing-play !

87.

“ Sir, will you have the truth ? This piece of yours

Is simply execrable past belief.

I shrank from saying so ; but, since nought cures

Conceit but truth, truth's at your service ! Brief,
Just so long as 'The Mercury' endures,
So long are you excluded by its Chief
From corner, nay, from cranny ! Play the cock
O' the roost, henceforth, at Croisic !" wrote La Roque.

88.

Paul yellowed, whitened, as his wrath from red
Waxed incandescent. Now, this man of rhyme
Was merely foolish, faulty in the head
Not heart of him : conceit 's a venial crime.
" Oh by no means malicious ! " cousins said :
Fussily feeble,—harmless all the time,
Piddling at so-called satire—well-advised
He held in most awe whom he satirized.

89.

Accordingly his kith and kin—removed
From emulation of the poet's gift
By power and will—these rather liked, nay, loved
The man who gave his family a lift
Out of the Croisic level ; disapproved
Satire so trenchant,—still our poet sniffed
Home-incense,—though too churlish to unlock
“ The Mercury's ” box of ointment proved La Roque.

90.

But when Paul's visage grew from red to white,
And from his lips a sort of mumbling fell
Of who was to be kicked,—“ And serve him right ! ”

A soft voice interposed "did kicking well
Answer the purpose ! Only—if I might
Suggest as much—a far more potent spell
Lies in another kind of treatment. Oh,
Women are ready at resource, you know !

91.

"Talent should minister to genius ! good :
The proper and superior smile returns.
Hear me with patience ! Have you understood
The only method whereby genius earns
His guerdon now-a-days ? In knightly mood
You entered lists with visor up ; one learns
Too late that, had you mounted Roland's crest,
'Room !' they had roared—La Roque with all the rest !

92.

“ Why did you first of all transmit your piece

To those same priggish Forty unprepared

Whether to rank you with the swans or geese

By friendly intervention ? If they dared

Count you a cackler,—wonders never cease !

I think it still more wondrous that you bared

Your brow (my earlier image) as if praise

Were gained by simple fighting now-a-days !

93.

“ Your next step showed a touch of the true means

Whereby desert is crowned : not force but wile

Came to the rescue. ‘ Get behind the scenes ! ’

Your friend advised : he writes, sets forth your style
And title, to such purpose intervenes

That you get velvet-compliment three-pile ;
And, though 'The Mercury' said 'nay,' nor stock
Nor stone did his refusal prove La Roque.

94.

"Why must you needs revert to the high hand,

Imperative procedure—what you call

'Taking on merit your exclusive stand?'

Stand, with a vengeance ! Soon you went to wall,

You and your merit ! Only fools command

When folks are free to disobey them, Paul !

You've learnt your lesson, found out what's o'clock,

By this uncivil answer of La Roque.

95.

“Now let me counsel ! Lay this piece on shelf
—Masterpiece though it be ! From out your desk
Hand me some lighter sample, verse the elf
Cupid inspired you with, no god grotesque
Presiding o’er the Navy ! I myself
Hand-write what ’s legible yet picturesque ;
I ’ll copy fair and femininely frock
Your poem masculine that courts La Roque !

96.

“Deïdamia he—Achilles thou !
Ha, ha, these ancient stories come so apt !
My sex, my youth, my rank I next avow

In a neat prayer for kind perusal. Sapped
I see the walls which stand so stoutly now !
I see the toils about the game entrapped
By honest cunning ! Chains of lady's-smock,
Not thorn and thistle, tether fast La Roque !”

97.

Now, who might be the speaker sweet and arch
That laughed above Paul's shoulder as it heaved
With the indignant heart ?—bade steal a march
And not continue charging ? Who conceived
This plan which set our Paul, like pea you parch
On fire-shovel, skipping, of a load relieved,
From arm-chair moodiness to escritoire
Sacred to Phœbus and the tuneful choir ?

98.

Who but Paul's sister ! named of course like him

“Desforbes” ; but, mark you, in those days a queer
Custom obtained,—who knows whence grew the whim?—

That people could not read their title clear
To reverence till their own true names, made dim

By daily mouthing, pleased to disappear,
Replaced by brand-new bright ones : Arouet,
For instance, grew Voltaire, Desforbes—Malcrais.

99.

“ Demoiselle Malcrais de la Vigne ”—because

The family possessed at Brederac
A vineyard,—few grapes, many hips and haws,—

Still a nice Breton name. As breast and back
Of this vivacious beauty gleamed through gauze,
So did her sprightly nature nowise lack
Lustre when draped, the fashionable way,
In "Malcrais de la Vigne"—more short, "Malcrais."

100.

Out from Paul's *escritoire* behold escape
The hoarded treasure ! verse falls thick and fast,
Sonnets and songs of every size and shape.
The lady ponders on her prize ; at last
Selects one which—Oh angel and yet ape !—
Her malice thinks is probably surpassed
In badness by no fellow of the flock,
Copies it fair, and "Now for my La Roque !"

101.

So, to him goes, with the neat manuscript,
The soft petitionary letter. "Grant
A fledgeling novice that with wing unclipt
She soar her little circuit, habitant
Of an old manor ; buried in which crypt,
How can the youthful châtelaine but pant
For disemprisonment by one *ad hoc*
Appointed ' Mercury's ' Editor, La Roque ? "

102.

'T was an epistle that might move the Turk !
More certainly it moved our middle-aged
Pen-driver drudging at his weary work,

Raked the old ashes up and disengaged
The sparks of gallantry which always lurk
Somehow in literary breasts, assuaged
In no degree by compliments on style ;
Are Forty wagging beards worth one girl's smile ?

103.

In trips the lady's poem, takes its place
Of honor in the gratified Gazette,
With due acknowledgment of power and grace ;
Prognostication, too, that higher yet
The Breton Muse will soar : fresh youth, high race,
Beauty and wealth have amicably met
That Demoiselle Malcrais may fill the chair
Left vacant by the loss of Deshoulières.

104.

“There !” cried the lively lady “Who was right—

You in the dumps, or I the merry maid

Who know a trick or two can baffle spite

Tenfold the force of this old fool’s? Afraid

Of Editor La Roque? But come ! next flight

Shall outsoar—Deshoulières alone ? My blade,

Sappho herself shall you confess outstript !

Quick, Paul, another dose of manuscript !”

105.

And so, once well a-foot, advanced the game :

More and more verses, corresponding gush

On gush of praise, till everywhere acclaim

Rose to the pitch of uproar. "Sappho? Tush!
Sure 'Malcrais on her Parrot' puts to shame
Deshoulières' pastorals, clay not worth a rush
Beside this find of treasure, gold in crock,
Unearthed in Brittany,—nay, ask La Roque!"

106.

Such was the Paris tribute. "Yes," you sneer,
"Ninnies stock Noodledom, but folks more sage
Resist contagious folly, never fear!"
Do they? Permit me to detach one page
From the huge Album which from far and near
Poetic praises blackened in a rage
Of rapture! and that page shall be—who stares
Confounded now, I ask you?—just Voltaire's!

107.

Ay, sharpest shrewdest steel that ever stabbed

To death Imposture through the armour-joints !

How did it happen that gross Humbug grabbed

Thy weapons, gouged thine eyes out ? Fate appoints
That pride shall have a fall, or I had blabbed

Hardly that Humbug, whom thy soul aoints,
Could thus cross-buttock thee caught unawares,
And dismalest of tumbles proved—Voltaire's !

108.

See his epistle extant yet, wherewith

“ Henri ” in verse and “ Charles ” in prose he sent
To do her suit and service ! Here's the pith

Of half a dozen stanzas—stones which went
To build that simulated monolith—

Sham love in due degree with homage blent
As sham—which in the vast of volumes scares
The traveller still : “ That stucco-heap—Voltaire’s ? ”

109.

“ Oh thou, whose clarion-voice has overflown

The wilds to startle Paris that’s one ear !

Thou who such strange capacity hast shown

For joining all that ’s grand with all that ’s dear,
Knowledge with power to please—Deshoulières grown

Learned as Dacier in thy person ! mere —
Weak fruit of idle hours, these crabs of mine
I dare lay at thy feet, O Muse divine !

I IO.

“ Charles was my task-work only ; Henri trod
My hero forth, and now, my heroine—she
Shall be thyself ! True—is it true, great God ?
Certainly love henceforward must not be !
Yet all the crowd of Fine Arts fail—how odd !—
Tried turn by turn, to fill a void in me !
The e ’s no replacing love with these, alas !
Yet all I can I do to prove no ass.

I II.

“ I labour to amuse my freedom ; but
Should any sweet young creature slavery preach,
And—borrowing thy vivacious charm, the slut !—

Make me, in thy engaging words, a speech,
Soon should I see myself in prison shut
With all imaginable pleasure." Reach
The washhand-basin for admirers ! There's
A stomach-moving tribute—and Voltaire's !

112.

Suppose it a fantastic billet-doux,
Adulatory flourish, not worth frown !
What say you to the Fathers of Trévoux ?
These in their Dictionary have her down
Under the heading " Author " : " Malcrais, too,
Is ' Author ' of much verse that claims renown."
While Jean-Baptiste Rousseau . . . but why proceed ?
Enough of this—something too much, indeed !

113.

At last La Roque, unwilling to be left

Behindhand in the rivalry, broke bounds

Of figurative passion ; hilt and heft,

Plunged his huge downright love through what
surrounds

The literary female bosom ; reft

Away its veil of coy reserve with "Zounds !

I love thee, Breton Beauty ! All 's no use !

Body and soul I love,—the big word 's loose !".

114.

He's greatest now and to de-struc-ti-on

Nearest. Attend the solemn word I quote,

Oh Paul ! *There's no pause at per-fec-ti-on.*

Thy knell thus knolls the Doctor's bronzed throat !

Greatness a period hath, no sta-ti-on !

Better and truer verse none ever wrote
(Despite the antique outstretched *a-i-on*)
Than thou, revered and magisterial Donne !

115.

Flat on his face, La Roque, and;—pressed to heart
His dexter hand,—Voltaire with bended knee !
Paul sat and sucked-in triumph ; just apart
Leaned over him his sister. “ Well ? ” smirks he,
And “ Well ? ” she answers, smiling—woman’s art
To let a man’s own mouth, not hers, decree
What shall be next move which decides the game :
Success ? She said so. Failure ? His the blame.

116.

“ Well ! ” this time forth affirmatively comes

With smack of lip, and long-drawn sigh through teeth
Close clenched o’er satisfaction, as the gums

Were tickled by a sweetmeat teased beneath
Palate by lubricating tongue : “ Well ! crums

Of comfort these, undoubtedly ! no death
Likely from famine at Fame’s feast ! ’t is clear
I may put claim in for my pittance, Dear !

117.

“ La Roque, Voltaire, my lovers ? Then disguise

Has served its turn, grows idle ; let it drop !

I shall to Paris, flaunt there in men’s eyes

My proper manly garb and mount a-top
The pedestal that waits me, take the prize
Awarded Hercules ! He threw a sop
To Cerberus who let him pass, you know,
Then, following, licked his heels : exactly so !

118.

“ I like the prospect—their astonishment,
Confusion : wounded vanity, no doubt,
Mixed motives ; how I see the brows quick bent !
‘ What, sir, yourself, none other, brought about
This change of estimation ? Phœbus sent
His shafts as from Diana ? Critic pout
Turns courtier smile : ‘ Lo, him we took for her !
Pleasant mistake ! You bear no malice, sir ? ’

119.

“ Eh, my Diana ? ” But Diana kept
Smilingly silent with fixed needle-sharp
Much-meaning eyes that seemed to intercept
Paul’s very thoughts ere they had time to warp
From earnest into sport the words they leapt
To life with—changed as when maltreated harp
Renders in tinkle what some player-prig
Means for a grave tune though it proves a jig.

120.

“ What, Paul, and are my pains thus thrown away,
My lessons perfect loss ? ” at length fall slow
The pitying syllables, her lips allay

The satire of by keeping in full flow,
Above their coral reef, bright smiles at play :
“ Can it be, Paul thus fails to rightly know
And altogether estimate applause
As just so many asinine he-haws ?

121.

“ I thought to show you ” . . . “ Show me,” Paul in-
broke

“ My poetry is rubbish, and the world
That rings with my renown a sorry joke !

What fairer test of worth than that, form furled,
I entered the arena ? Yet you croak

Just as if Phœbé and not Phœbus hurled
The dart and struck the Python ! What, he crawls
Humbly in dust before your feet, not Paul's ?

122.

“Nay, ’t is no laughing matter though absurd

If there’s an end of honesty on earth !

La Roque sends letters, lying every word !

Voltaire makes verse, and of himself makes mirth

To the remotest age ! Rousseau’s the third

Who, driven to despair amid such dearth

Of people that want praising, finds no one

More fit to praise than Paul the simpleton !

123.

“Somebody says—if a man writes at all

It is to show the writer’s kith and kin

He was unjustly thought a natural ;

And truly, sister, I have yet to win
Your favourable word, it seems, for Paul
Whose poetry you count not worth a pin
Though well enough esteemed by these Voltaires,
Rousseaus and suchlike : let them quack, who cares? ”

124.

“ —To Paris with you, Paul ! Not one word’s waste
Further : my scrupulosity was vain !
Go triumph ! Be my foolish fears effaced
From memory’s record ! Go, to come again
With glory crowned,—by sister re-embraced,
Cured of that strange delusion of her brain
Which led her to suspect that Paris gloats
On male limbs mostly when in petticoats ! ”

125.

So laughed her last word, with the little touch
Of malice proper to the outraged pride
Of any artist in a work too much
Shorn of its merits. "By all means, be tried
The opposite procedure ! Cast your crutch
Away, no longer crippled, nor divide
The credit of your march to the World's Fair
With sister Cherry-cheeks who helped you there !"

126.

Crippled, forsooth ! what courser sprightlier pranced
Paris-ward than did Paul ? Nay, dreams lent wings :
He flew, or seemed to fly, by dreams entranced.

Dreams? wide-awake realities : no things
Dreamed merely were the missives that advanced
The claim of Malcrais to consort with kings
Crowned by Apollo—not to say with queens
Cinctured by Venus for Idalian scenes.

127.

Soon he arrives, forthwith is found before
The outer gate of glory. Bold tic-toc
Announces there's a giant at the door.

“Ay, sir, here dwells the Chevalier La Roque.”
“Lackey ! Malcrais,—mind, no word less nor more !—
Desires his presence. I've unearthed the brock :
Now, to transfix him !” There stands Paul erect,
Inched out his uttermost, for more effect.

128.

A bustling entrance : " Idol of my flame !

Can it be that my heart attains at last

Its longing? that you stand, the very same

As in my visions? . . . Ha ! hey, how ? " aghast

Stops short the rapture. " Oh, my boy's to blame!

You merely are the messenger ! Too fast

My fancy rushed to a conclusion. Pooh !

Well, sir, the lady's substitute is—who ? "

129.

Then Paul's smirk grows inordinate. " Shake hands !

Friendship not love awaits you, master mine,

Though nor Malcrais nor any mistress stands

To meet your ardour ! So, you don't divine
Who wrote the verses wherewith ring the land's
Whole length and breadth ? Just he whereof no line
Had ever leave to blot your Journal—eh ?
Paul Desforges Maillard—otherwise Malcrais ! '

130.

And there the two stood, stare confronting smirk,
Awhile uncertain which should yield the *pas*.
In vain the Chevalier beat brain for quirk
To help in this conjuncture ; at length " Bah !
Boh ! Since I've made myself a fool, why shirk
The punishment of folly ? Ha, ha, ha,
Let me return your handshake ! " Comic sock
For tragic buskin prompt thus changed La Roque.

131.

“ I’m nobody—a wren-like journalist ;

You’ve flown at higher game and winged your bird,
The golden eagle ! That’s the grand acquist !

Voltaire’s sly Muse, the tiger-cat, has purred
Prettily round your feet ; but if she missed

Priority of stroking, soon were stirred
The dormant spit-fire. To Voltaire ! away,
Paul Desforbes Maillard, otherwise Malcrais ! ”

132.

Whereupon, arm in arm, and head in air,

The two begin their journey. Need I say,
La Roque had felt the talon of Voltaire,

Had a long-standing little debt to pay,
And pounced, you may depend, on such a rare
Occasion for its due discharge? So, gay
And grenadier-like, marching to assault,
They reach the enemy's abode, there halt.

133.

'I'll be announcer !' quoth La Roque : " I know,
Better than you, perhaps, my Breton bard,
How to procure an audience ! He's not slow
To smell a rat, this scamp Voltaire ! Discard
The petticoats too soon,—you'll never show
Your *haut-de-chausses* and all they've made or marred
In your true person. Here's his servant. Pray,
Will the great man see Demoiselle Malcrais ? "

134.

Now, the great man was also, no whit less,
The man of self-respect,—more great man he !
And bowed to social usage, dressed the dress,
And decorated to the fit degree
His person ; 't was enough to bear the stress
Of battle in the field, without, when free
From outside foes, inviting friends' attack
By—sword in hand? No, ill-made coat on back.

135.

And, since the announcement of his visitor
Surprised him at his toilet,—never glass
Had such solicitation ! “ Black, now—or

Brown be the killing wig to wear? Alas,
Where's the rouge gone, this cheek were better for
A tender touch of? Melted to a mass,
All my pomatum! There's at all events
A devil—for he's got among my scents!"

136.

So, "barbered ten times o'er," as Antony
Paced to his Cleopatra, did at last
Voltaire proceed to the fair presence : high
In colour, proud in port, as if a blast
Of trumpet bade the world "Take note! draws nigh
To Beauty, Power! Behold the Iconoclast,
The Poet, the Philosopher, the Rod
Of iron for imposture! Ah my God!"

137.

For there stands smirking Paul, and—what lights fierce
The situation as with sulphur flash—
There grinning stands La Roque ! No carte-and-tierce
Observes the grinning fencer, but, full dash
From breast to shoulderblade, the thrusts transpierce
That armour against which so idly clash
The swords of priests and pedants ! Victors there,
Two smirk and grin who have befooled—Voltaire !

138.

A moment's horror ; then quick turn-about
On high-heeled shoe,—flurry of ruffles, flounce
Of wig-ties and of coat-tails,—and so out

Of door banged wrathfully behind, goes—bounce—
Voltaire in tragic exit ! vows, no doubt,
Vengeance upon the couple. Did he trounce
Either, in point of fact ? His anger's flash
Subsided if a culprit craved his cash,

139.

As for La Roque, he having laughed his laugh
To heart's content,—the joke defunct at once,
Dead in the birth, you see,—its epitaph
Was sober earnest. “ Well, sir, for the nonce,
You've gained the laurel ; never hope to graff
A second sprig of triumph there ! Ensconce
Yourself again at Croisic : let it be
Enough you mastered both Voltaire and—me !

140.

“ Don’t linger here in Paris to parade
Your victory, and have the very boys
Point at you ! ‘ There’s the little mouse which made
Believe those two big lions that its noise,
Nibbling away behind the hedge, conveyed
Intelligence that—portent which destroys
All courage in the lion’s heart, with horn
That’s fable—there lay couched the unicorn ! ’

141.

“ Beware us, now we’ve found who fooled us ! Quick
To cover ! ‘ In proportion to men’s fright,
Expect their fright’s revenge ! ’ quoth politic

Old Macchiavelli. As for me,—all's right :

I'm but a journalist. But no pin's prick

The tooth leaves when Voltaire is roused to bite !

So, keep your counsel, I advise ! Adieu !

Good journey ! Ha, ha, ha, Malcrais was—you ! ”

142.

“—Yes, I'm Malcrais, and somebody beside,

You snickering monkey ! ” thus winds up the tale

Our hero, safe at home, to that black-eyed

Cherry-cheeked sister, as she soothes the pale

Mortified poet. “ Let their worst be tried,

I'm their match henceforth—very man and male !

Don't talk to me of knocking-under ! man

And male must end what petticoats began !

143

“ How woman-like it is to apprehend

The world will eat its words ! why, words transfixed
To stone, they stare at you in print,—at end,

Each writer's style and title ! Choose betwixt
Fool and knave for his name, who should intend

To perpetrate a baseness so unmixed
With prospect of advantage ! What is writ
Is writ : they've praised me, there's an end of it !

144.

“ No, Dear, allow me ! I shall print these same

Pieces, with no omitted line, as Paul's.

Malcrais no longer, let me see folks blame

What they—praised simply?—placed on pedestals,
Each piece a statue in the House of Fame !

Fast will they stand there, though their presence galls
The envious crew : such show their teeth, perhaps,
And snarl, but never bite ! I know the chaps !”

145.

Oh Paul, oh piteously deluded ! Pace

Thy sad sterility of Croisic flats,
Watch, from their southern edge, the foamy race
Of high-tide as it heaves the drowning mats
Of yellow-berried web-growth from their place,
The rock-ridge, when, rolling as far as Batz,
One broadside crashes on it, and the crags,
That needle under, stream with weedy rags !

146.

Or, if thou wilt, at inland Bergerac,
Rude heritage but recognized domain,
Do as two here are doing : make hearth crack
With logs until thy chimney roar again
Jolly with fire-glow ! Let its angle lack
No grace of Cherry-cheeks thy sister, fain
To do a sister's office and laugh smooth
Thy corrugated brow—that scowls forsooth !

147.

Wherefore? Who does not know how these La Roques
Voltaires, can say and unsay, praise and blame,
Prove black white, white black, play at paradox

And, when they seem to lose it, win the game?
Care not thou what this badger, and that fox,
His fellow in rascality, call "fame!"
Fiddlepin's end! Thou hadst it,—quack, quack,
quack!
Have quietude from geese at Bergerac!

148.

Quietude! For, be very sure of this!
A twelvemonth hence, and men shall know or care
As much for what to-day they clap or hiss
As for the fashion of the wigs they wear,
Then wonder at. There's fame which, bale or bliss,—
Got by no gracious word of great Voltaire
Or not-so-great La Roque,—is taken back
By neither, any more than Bergerac!

149.

Too true ! or rather, true as ought to be !

No more of Paul the man, Malcrais the maid,
Thenceforth for ever ! One or two, I see,

Stuck by their poet : who the longest stayed
Was Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, and even he
Seemingly saddened as perforce he paid
A rhyming tribute “ After death, survive—
He hoped he should : and died while yet alive ! ”

150.

No, he hoped nothing of the kind, or held

His peace and died in silent good old age.

Him it was, curiosity impelled

To seek if there were extant still some page
Of his great predecessor, rat who belled
The cat once, and would never deign engage
In after-combat with mere mice,—saved from
More sonnetteering,—René Gentilhomme.

151.

Paul's story furnished forth that famous play
Of Piron's " Métromanie " : there you'll find
He's Francaleu, while Demoiselle Malcrais
Is Demoiselle No-end-of-names-behind !
As for Voltaire, he's Damis. Good and gay
The plot and dialogue, and all's designed
To spite Voltaire : at " Something " such the laugh
Of simply " Nothing !" (see his epitaph.)

152.

But truth, truth, that's the gold ! and all the good
I find in fancy is, it serves to set
Gold's inmost glint free, gold which comes up rude
And rayless from the mine. All fume and fret
Of artistry beyond this point pursued
Brings out another sort of burnish : yet
Always the ingot has its very own
Value, a sparkle struck from truth alone.

153.

Now, take this sparkle and the other spirt
Of fitful flame,—twin births of our grey brand
That's sinking fast to ashes ! I assert,

As sparkles want but fuel to expand
Into a conflagration no mere squirt
Will quench too quickly, so might Croisic strand,
Had Fortune pleased posterity to chowse,
Boast of her brace of beacons luminous.

154.

Did earlier Agamemnons lack their bard ?
But later bards lacked Agamemnon too !
How often frustrate they of fame's award
Just because Fortune, as she listed, blew
Some slight bark's sails to bellying, mauled and marred
And forced to put about the First-rate ! True,
Such tacks but for a time : still—small-craft ride
At anchor, rot while Beddoes breasts the tide !

155.

Dear, shall I tell you? There's a simple test

Would serve, when people take on them to weigh
The worth of poets, "Who was better, best,

This, that, the other bard?" (bards none gainsay
As good, observe! no matter for the rest)

"What quality preponderating may
Turn the scale as it trembles?" End the strife
By asking "Which one led a happy life?"

156.

If one did, over his antagonist

That yelled or shrieked or sobbed or wept or wailed
Or simply had the dumps,—dispute who list,—

I count him victor. Where his fellow failed,
Mastered by his own means of might,—acquist
Of necessary sorrows,—he prevailed,
A strong since joyful man who stood distinct
Above slave-sorrows to his chariot linked.

157.

Was not his lot to feel more? What meant “feel”
Unless to suffer! Not, to see more? Sight—
What helped it but to watch the drunken reel
Of vice and folly round him, left and right,
One dance of imps and idiots! Not, to deal
More with things lovely? What provoked the spite
Of filth incarnate, like the poet’s need
Of other nutriment than strife and greed!

158.

Who knows most, doubts most ; entertaining hope,
Means recognizing fear ; the keener sense
Of all comprised within our actual scope
Recoils from aught beyond earth's dim and dense.
Who, grown familiar with the sky, will grope
Henceforward among groundlings ? That's offence
Just as indubitably : stars abound
O'erhead, but then—what flowers make glad the ground !

159.

So, force is sorrow, and each sorrow, force :
What then ? since Swiftness gives the charioteer
The palm, his hope be in the vivid horse

Whose neck God clothed with thunder, not the steer
Sluggish and safe ! Yoke Hatred, Crime, Remorse,
Despair : but ever mid the whirling fear,
Let, through the tumult, break the poet's face
Radiant, assured his wild slaves win the race !

160.

Therefore I say . . . no, shall not say, but think,
And save my breath for better purpose. White
From grey our log has burned to : just one blink
That quivers, loth to leave it, as a sprite
The outworn body. Ere your eyelids' wink
Punish who sealed so deep into the night
Your mouth up, for two poets dead so long,—
Here pleads a live pretender : right your wrong !



I.

What a pretty tale you told me

Once upon a time

—Said you found it somewhere (scold me !)

Was it prose or was it rhyme,

Greek or Latin ? Greek, you said,

While your shoulder propped my head.

2.

Anyhow there 's no forgetting

This much if no more,

That a poet (pray, no petting !)

Yes, a bard, sir, famed of yore,

Went where suchlike used to go,

Singing for a prize, you know.

3.

Well, he had to sing, nor merely
Sing but play the lyre ;
Playing was important clearly
Quite as singing : I desire,
Sir, you keep the fact in mind
For a purpose that 's behind.

4.

There stood he, while deep attention
Held the judges round,
—Judges able, I should mention,
To detect the slightest sound
Sung or played amiss : such ears
Had old judges, it appears !

5.

None the less he sang out boldly,
 Played in time and tune,
Till the judges, weighing coldly
 Each note's worth, seemed, late or soon,
Sure to smile "In vain one tries
Picking faults out : take the prize !"

6.

When, a mischief ! Were they seven
 Strings the lyre possessed ?
Oh, and afterwards eleven,
 Thank you ! Well, sir,—who had guessed
Such ill luck in store ?—it happed
One of those same seven strings snapped.

7.

All was lost, then ! No ! a cricket
 (What “ cicada ” ? Pooh !)
—Some mad thing that left its thicket
 For mere love of music—flew
With its little heart on fire,
Lighted on the crippled lyre.

8.

So that when (Ah joy !) our singer
 For his truant string
Feels with disconcerted finger,
 What does cricket else but fling
Fiery heart forth, sound the note
Wanted by the throbbing throat ?

9.

Ay and, ever to the ending,
Cricket chirps at need,
Executes the hand's intending,
Promptly, perfectly,—indeed
Saves the singer from defeat
With her chirrup low and sweet.

10.

Till, at ending, all the judges
Cry with one assent
“Take the prize—a prize who grudges
Such a voice and instrument?
Why, we took your lyre for harp,
So it shrilled us forth F sharp !”

II.

Did the conqueror spurn the creature,

Once its service done?

That 's no such uncommon feature

In the case when Music's son

Finds his Lotte's power too spent

For aiding soul-development.

12.

No ! This other, on returning

Homeward, prize in hand,

Satisfied his bosom's yearning :

(Sir, I hope you understand !)

—Said "Some record there must be

Of this cricket's help to me !"

13.

So, he made himself a statue :

Marble stood, life-size ;

On the lyre, he pointed at you,

Perched his partner in the prize ;

Never more apart you found

Her, he throned, from him, she crowned.

14.

That 's the tale : its application ?

Somebody I know

Hopes one day for reputation

Through his poetry that 's—Oh,

All so learned and so wise

And deserving of a prize !

15.

If he gains one, will some ticket,
When his statue 's built,
Tell the gazer " 'T was a cricket
Helped my crippled lyre, whose lilt
Sweet and low, when strength usurped
Softness' place i' the scale, she chirped?

16.

" For as victory was nighest,
While I sang and played,—
With my lyre at lowest, highest,
Right alike,—one string that made
' Love ' sound soft was snap in twain,
Never to be heard again,—

17.

“ Had not a kind cricket fluttered,
Perched upon the place
Vacant left, and duly uttered
‘ Love, Love, Love,’ whene’er the bass
Asked the treble to atone
For its somewhat sombre drone.”

18.

But you don’t know music ! Wherefore
Keep on casting pearls
To a—poet? All I care for
Is—to tell him that a girl’s
“ Love ” comes aptly in when gruff
Grows his singing. (There, enough !)

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